

As We Know It

“Do it now, do it now, Johnnie.”

I pressed the button marked “Gilligan’s Island” and a muzak version of the television theme song began its crackling ascent from the speakers. A woman in a business suit and heels stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned around, squinting toward the rusted out recycled squad care we rode in.

“A three hour tour ...” Benjamin leaned out the window, half singing, half screaming to the music.

Samuel and Alexander were rolling around in the back seat, laughter fits bringing tears to their eyes.

I grabbed the wheel for Benjamin as he thrust the rest of his upper body out the window, now hanging by his thighs and blowing kisses to the confused woman on the sidewalk.

Benjamin was the only guy I knew who would think of attaching a musical doorbell system to his car – he’s really a nut. He added speakers on the roof and everything. He did that right after he stenciled “Goonie-mobile” on the car’s primer-colored doors.

“Push it again,” he called to me, pounding his fist on the windshield. I opened the glove box, pressed another button, and tinny notes from the “Love

Boat” theme blared around us as the Goonie-mobile coasted down Harvey Street.

Samuel and Alex were in hysterics. The woman stared after us.

“Ask her if she’d like to join the Goonies for lunch,” I said to Benjamin. “Goonies” was the name of our pseudo-band – well, actually it was “Chunk and the Goonies” ‘cause Samuel, our lead singer, used to be fat.

“Care to join a gaggle of handsome lads for lunch at Archie’s miss?” he called.

She looked away and began walking again quickly.

“Eh, maybe she’ll meet us there. Onward, boys, to the temple of nicoffeine,” Benjamin slid back into the seat, grabbing a cigarette off the dash before taking the wheel.

We rounded the corner and pulled into Archie’s restaurant, second on our list of favorite places to drink coffee, smoke GPCs, and discuss the psychological trials of teen life in Knox, Indiana.

According to the town’s welcome sign, Knox is “where opportunity knocks,” but that’s only at the doors of those who pine for the opportunity to join the assembly line at the American Rubber factory or bus tables at Archie’s.

Archie greeted us with a greasy grin, and we headed to our regular table to get down to business.

“So, you got the goods, Alexander?” Benjamin asked, pouring a sixth packet of sugar into his cup.

“Yeah, I cleaned out our whole snack cupboard. Hop my mom doesn’t get pissy.” Samuel mentioned his mom’s pissiness at least ten times a day.

“Cool, then we’re all set for tonight,” said Benjamin in between sips.

What he meant by “tonight” was our plot – well, actually it was more like a goal, to spend the entire night at Buz-Mart.

Buz-Mart (pronounced like “booze-mart” despite the fact that it sold no liquor, and despite the dogged efforts of K.R.A.B.S. – Knox Republicans Against Beer and Smoking) had become a 24-hour amusement park for the Goonies that winter. We spent countless weekend hours wandering around Buz-Mart, searching, with nearly empty pockets, for a scarf for Samuel’s mic or a how-to book on home tattooing, testing out the sit-n’-spins, watching 27 TVs.

“Hey, you know that corner back by the knitting supplies? I was thinking that might be a good spot to camp. No one knits much anymore.”

Of course, it had been Benjamin’s idea to see how long we could stay in the store without getting kicked out. Of course, we all thought it was a fantastic idea. Some people just always have fantastic ideas.

“Yeah-yeah,” I chipped in, “it’s close to the furniture section too so we won’t have to drag the bean bags far.”

“Do you think it’d be stealing to use a radio for the evening?” Alexander asked. “I mean if we box it back up and all?”

“Nah, man,” said Benjamin. “It’s all about sharing, man. Mr. Buzaboli is a generous guy.”

We sipped in silence for a while, the smoke settling in the glow of the pink, wok-shaped lamp above our table. Then, without anyone really saying anything, we decided it was time to embark on our evening’s adventures. We each dropped a buck on the table and headed out to the Goonie-mobile. I drove while Benjamin smoked in the front seat. In the back, Alexander bit his nails, and Samuel sang along to some Genesis tune on the radio.

I felt a sense of coming home, as I pulled past the glowing green sign.

“Hello, and welcome to Buz-Mart,” the old lady in the motorized shopping cart greeted us as we strolled though the electric doors, feeling a little like royalty on the red, slush-soaked mats.

Benjamin tipped his hat, like a crown, to her, and we headed to the CD aisle, Alexander lugging a duffel bag of Twizzlers, Fango, and Funyons.

Silence ensued as we became lost in our own musical tastes, sifting through the

shelves of music for albums we didn't have the money to buy. Benjamin drooled over Marvin Gaye and Squirrel Nut Zippers. I pulled out Miles Davis' Greatest Hits and stroked the cool, plastic case. Samuel and Alexander hovered in the L's scoping out Jerry Lee Lewis and L7.

Benjamin considered pocketing Gaye. I saw him slipping the CD in and out of his jacket. And then, as if it burned his fingers, back onto the rack. Benjamin said he had nothing against stealing as long as it was from monstrous corporations but he'd never been able to bring himself to gank anything.

We trudged over to the pharmaceuticals sections for a game of Prophylactic Predictions.

A guy entered the aisle with his head down and his hands in his pockets. He scratched his nose, looked around, and stealthily grabbed a box before sauntering away, the Lifestyles label hidden in his palm.

"A 16-year-old name Lindsay, her parents' bed when they're on vacation," whispered Benjamin.

Next a 30-ish woman in a black, stretchy skirt. She squatted down to read the labels, "Extra thin," "Lubricated," "Strawberry-flavored." Her tight calves rippled under the hem of her skirt as she reached for a box of Trojans marked "Ribbed for mutual sensation."

“Forty-five-year-old married stockbroker boyfriend, the back seat of his 7-day-old Saab,” I guessed.

We went on like that for a while, peaking out from behind bottles of vitamins, until we didn’t want to anymore.

“Read to play dress-up, goils?” Benjamin began skipping like the Easter Bunny into the wracks of clothing. We loaded our arms and disappeared into dressing rooms. Benjamin emerged in a pair of old men” checkered plaid pants, flip flops, and an undershirt, looking exactly like his uncle Frank. Alexander emerged in a pair of faux Dickie jeans and a big red T-shirt, looking exactly like Alexander. Samuel and I just looked like fools.

We headed over to the candy buffet aisle and nibbled for a while before deciding to set up camp under the yarn and needles. Benjamin and I lay on beanbags, Alexander and Samuel on their coats. The Funyons and Fango kept us in quiet complacency for a while.

Conversation started.

“Have you heard the new Voodoo Daddies CD?” I volunteered. “Cool, real cool.”

“I don’t know. It sounded too much like their first one,” Benjamin said, sucking a Twizzler as if it were a cigar.

“Yeah, it has some hip songs I think we could cover though,” Samuel hopped in.

Samuel's evaluations of music always included an assessment of whether we could play it or not.

"Man, why do you always wanna do cover shit?" Benjamin whined. "I've written like ten songs, and all you ever wanna sing is Mighty Mighty Bosstones and Violent Femmes."

"Cause the Femmes and Bosstones songs are good," I said, whipping a Twizzler at Benjamin's head. Benjamin could whip us all at guitar but for some reason he wanted to be a songwriter instead. Unfortunately, his lyrics were for shit.

"Fuck you," Benjamin tried to sound angry. "I'm getting some good stuff these days."

"Which days are those?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Benjamin shrugged me off.

Then he said, "What are you afraid of?"

"Who me?" Alexander started a bit.

"Yeah, you, all of you. What really scares the shit out of you?"

"Fuck if I know," Alexander played with a knitting needle, stabbing it through the paper sleeve of the yarn to make rows of small holes.

"I do," said Samuel. "You're scared shit your mom's going to find out you smoke."

"Yeah, well, you're scared of pitting out your shirt," Alexander countered. "I see how much freaking deodorant you put on."

You carry it around with you like chapstick.”

“Ick” was the last sound we heard as she came around the corner, the letters of Buz-Mart stretching over her protruding paunch.

“Hello, there, Donna,” Benjamin read her name off her nametag, turning on the charm. This wasn’t the first time he’d finagled with authority; he was in his element.

“Hello, little boys,” Donna said with exaggerated cheeriness. She seemed to struggle under the weight of her pregnant belly, arching her back onto her hands. “Enjoying your little campout?”

“Indeed we are,” Benjamin offered her a drink of Fango.

“Yeah, well, Mr. Buzaboli wouldn’t appreciate you stealing his radio, I don’t think.”

“Correction, please,” Benjamin raised his index finger in the air. “We’re merely test-playing it. We’ll box it back up when we’re through.”

Benjamin’s placidity made angry, red splotches appear on her cheeks. “Think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you? Well, let me tell you something, little boy, you haven’t got a clue what real life is.”

“Huh?” Benjamin suddenly had no come-back.

“I mean,” she blinked spastically, “you guys sit here, 18 years old, eating Funyons

and talking shit around your little pretend campground in a department store.”

Alexander's and Samuel's heads jerked up at the mention of Funyons, as if they'd just then noticed the woman.

“Look, lady,” Benjamin began, “we'll move so you can stock the yarn, alright?”

“You're scared of mothers and pit stains. You're babies, just babies pretending to be men.”

“So, what are you scared of?” I came to life, wondering who this chick thought she was, eavesdropping on us.

“What am *I* scared of? What am *I* scared of?” her eyes bulged, and I thought she might try to choke me. “*I'm* scared I'll sign the papers and then not be able to do it. I'm scared I'll work this fucking peon job and carry this stupid load for nine nauseating months, and then when it finally comes time to give it to the rich, desperate Darrelsons in Arlington Heights, I'll find something I like about the little chigger.”

The word “chigger” reverberated in the cotton around our ears. Donna's chest heaved, quick, short, furious breaths. Benjamin looked at the floor.

“Look, could you please just not add this shit to my already shit-filled day?” she choked. “Leave.”

Benjamin turned the radio a few notches louder. “It's the End of the World As We Know It” spewed from the plastic speakers.

She closed her eyes, blinking back tears, and her sneakers squeaked away through the automotive aisle.

Benjamin sighed. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Alexander and Samuel crinkled the bag of Twizzlers open.

"Just cause the condom broke doesn't give her a right to be all ugly to us," I said. "We *know* what real life is."

I leaned back on my bean bag, crossing my hands behind my head. The foam beans settled as I wiggled deeper into the hot pink pleather. There's really nothing more satisfying than finding just the right spot in a bean bag chair. It can take a while but when you get it, it's like everything just sort of clicks, and life feels flawless. I wondered if Donna knew what that was like. As I found the right spot, a voice crackled through the store, "Security to crafts, security to crafts."

-Amy Vaerewyck

